

The White Tiger Through the Lens of Feminism

Dr Divya Singh

Associate Professor, Department of English, C.M.P. Degree College, Prayagraj 211002 UP, India

divyasinghcmp@gmail.com

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Abstract— Aravind Adiga's Booker Prize-winning novel *The White Tiger* (2008) has been widely examined as a narrative of class rebellion and postcolonial critique; however, its feminist and subaltern dimensions remain critically underexplored. This paper interrogates the novel through a feminist-subaltern framework, drawing upon Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's foundational question "Can the subaltern speak?" to examine the structurally silenced, rendered invisible, and doubly marginalised female figures who haunt Balram Halwai's first-person confession. While Balram's voice dominates the narrative, the women surrounding him, Kishan's unnamed wife, Pinky Madam, and the shadowy figures of the Darkness, are confined to the periphery of language, agency, and self-representation, embodying the condition of the subaltern within contemporary India's fractured socio-economic landscape. The paper is organized into five interlocking sections: an introduction situating the novel within postcolonial feminist discourse; a review of the intellectual genealogy of subaltern studies from Gramsci through the Subaltern Studies Collective to Spivak's feminist revision; a close textual analysis of female characters as embodiments of double subordination; an examination of the limits and possibilities of defiance; and a contextualisation of the novel's gender politics within contemporary India. The study ultimately argues that the novel's true subaltern is not Balram — who ultimately speaks and escapes — but the women whose silence makes his voice possible.



Keywords— Subaltern, Feminism, Aravind Adiga, Postcolonial Fiction, Defiance, Contemporary India

I. INTRODUCTION

Aravind Adiga's debut novel, *The White Tiger* (2008), arrives in the tradition of postcolonial fiction that refuses the consolations of nationalist narrative. Winner of the Man Booker Prize, the novel takes the form of a series of letters written by Balram Halwai — a low-caste entrepreneur and confessed murderer — to the visiting Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao. Through Balram's sardonic, self-congratulatory voice, Adiga maps the brutal terrain of class, caste, and economic aspiration in the India of the early twenty-first century. Scholarship on the novel has rightly focused on its scalding critique of neo-liberal capitalism and the corrosive mythology of the "rooster coop" — the social mechanism through which the oppressed internalise their own subjugation (Adiga 173).

Yet a striking critical lacuna persists: the novel's women remain largely unexamined. Feminist and subaltern scholarship offers a powerful corrective lens through which the text's silences become as significant as its declarations.

Following Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's foundational intervention, which argues that the subaltern and specifically the subaltern woman — "cannot speak" within the epistemic frameworks of dominant discourse, this paper contends that *The White Tiger* performs an ironic feminist allegory (Spivak 308). The man who escapes subaltern condition does so on the broken backs and muted voices of women who remain trapped within it.

This paper proceeds from the conviction that literary analysis is never merely aesthetic: it is political. To read *The White Tiger* through the lens of feminism is to uncover a structural gender violence that operates alongside, and is inseparable from, the violence of caste and class. Drawing upon Spivak, Ranajit Guha, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, bell hooks, and Simone de Beauvoir, among others, this study offers a close reading of the novel's female characters as sites of double and sometimes triple subjugation: by gender, caste, and the accelerating demands of a globalising economy.

II. THE SUBALTERN AND SUBALTERN STUDIES

The concept of the subaltern enters critical theory through Antonio Gramsci, who deployed the term in his *Prison Notebooks* to describe social groups excluded from meaningful participation in history, those who lack access to the institutions and discourses through which hegemonic power perpetuates itself (Gramsci 52). Gramsci's subaltern is defined by fragmentation, heterogeneity, and the absence of a unified political consciousness. This foundational instability was productively complicated by the Subaltern Studies Collective, founded in 1982 under the editorship of Ranajit Guha.

Guha and his colleagues, including Partha Chatterjee, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and David Arnold, sought to recover the voices and historical agency of the South Asian peasantry and dispossessed from the twin blind spots of colonialist and nationalist historiography. In the landmark essay "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India," Guha argues that both the colonial archive and the nationalist counter-archive systematically erase the consciousness of subaltern subjects, producing histories in which the masses appear only as objects of elite management rather than as agents of their own making (Guha 37).

It is Spivak's feminist deconstruction of the Subaltern Studies project, however, that most directly informs the present paper. In her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), Spivak insists that the Collective's own recuperative project risks reinstating a romanticism of subaltern consciousness that forecloses the very question it purports to answer. More crucially for feminist purposes, Spivak draws attention to the gendered dimensions of subalternity: "If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (Spivak 287). The subaltern woman is doubly erased — by colonial power and by the patriarchal structures of the communities within which she lives.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty extends this analysis in *Feminism Without Borders*, cautioning against homogenising constructions of the "third world woman" as a monolithic victim while insisting on the material specificity of women's oppression under neo-colonialism and globalisation (Mohanty 19). This methodological insistence on specificity is essential to reading *The White Tiger*: the women of Adiga's novel are not generic symbols of victimhood but precisely situated subjects whose silence is overdetermined by the specific configurations of caste, class, and gender that structure life in contemporary India.

III. PORTRAYAL OF THE SUBALTERN IN THE WHITE TIGER

Adiga peoples his novel with women who are present everywhere and listened to nowhere. The most structurally significant of these is Kishan's wife, referred to throughout simply as "the wife," never granted a name. This nominal erasure is itself a feminist statement. As Simone de Beauvoir argued in *The Second Sex*, the reduction of women to a relational identity — wife, mother, daughter is a mechanism of ontological dispossession: she is defined by her function within a male order rather than by any selfhood of her own (de Beauvoir 267). Kishan's wife is a labouring body: she cooks, cleans, endures, and disappears from the text as silently as she entered it.

Pinky Madam, the American-Indian wife of Balram's employer Ashok, appears at first to offer a contrast. She inhabits a world of relative privilege: she has access to consumer culture, urban mobility, and the social capital of diaspora identity. Yet Pinky Madam's story is one of profound entrapment. Her complicity in the hit-and-run accident that kills a child, her inability to secure justice or even acknowledgement of her own guilt, and her eventual flight from India without consequence illustrate the way in which class privilege for women remains contingent and fragile, dependent entirely on the goodwill and protection of men (Adiga 221).

Significantly, Pinky Madam's departure from India is not an act of liberation but of flight — she escapes not into autonomy but into the anonymity of another patriarchal order. Her leaving solves nothing for the unnamed woman whose child was killed. That woman, never individualised, never named, is the novel's most complete subaltern: her grief is unregistered, her loss uncompensated, her voice absent from the text. She exists in the narrative only as the catalyst for Pinky Madam's breakdown and eventual disappearance, instrumentalised even in her suffering.

The women of "the Darkness", the rural world from which Balram escapes, are collectively presented as victims of a social order that Adiga renders with unflinching brutality. They are married off without consent, subjected to domestic violence as a matter of unremarkable routine, and denied education, mobility, and economic independence. Bell hooks' contention in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* that race and class oppressions are inextricable from gender oppression finds vivid illustration here: these women are not merely poor, not merely low-caste — they are poor, low-caste, and female, and each of these conditions amplifies the others (hooks 32).

Even Balram's relationship to the women in his family is revelatory. He regards them with a mixture of pity and contempt, recognising their subjugation without

possessing the framework or the will to challenge it. His grandmother Kusum is the single female figure who holds any authority in his childhood world — yet her power is exercised entirely in the service of patriarchal economic imperatives: she negotiates Balram's labour, arranges his brother's marriage, and manages the family's financial survival. Her agency is real, but it is an agency entirely in the service of a system that subordinates her.

IV. THE DEFIANCE

Defiance in *The White Tiger* is a gendered phenomenon. Balram's spectacular act of resistance — the murder of his employer Ashok is available to him precisely because he occupies a position, however lowly, within a masculine economy of violence and mobility. His escape from the rooster coop is enabled by his gender: he can move through cities, take jobs, enter spaces, and ultimately disappear into the entrepreneurial anonymity of Bangalore in ways categorically unavailable to the women around him.

Homi Bhabha's concept of "mimicry" is instructive here. In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha describes the colonial subject's appropriation of the coloniser's tools and signs as a form of ambivalent resistance — neither pure compliance nor full subversion (Bhabha 122). Balram mimics the discourse and behaviour of his masters: he adopts their speech, their ambitions, their willingness to deploy violence. This mimicry is available to him as a male subject. The novel contains no equivalent space for female mimicry — no moment where a woman appropriates the tools of her oppressors for any purpose, however ambivalent.

The closest the novel comes to female defiance is in Pinky Madam's departure. Yet, as argued above, this is not defiance but retreat — not a challenge to the structures that oppress her but a withdrawal from the scene of their operation. It is also worth noting that Pinky Madam's relative privilege places her outside the category of the subaltern proper: she has the resources to flee precisely because she has never been fully trapped. Her flight is only possible because of the class position guaranteed by her husband's wealth.

The unnamed women of the Darkness have no such exit. Their defiance, where it exists at all, is of the quiet, survivalist variety that James C. Scott calls "everyday resistance" — the small, undramatic acts through which subordinate groups navigate their subjugation without openly contesting it (Scott 29). These acts are real, and they deserve recognition, but they do not transform the structures that produce their necessity. Spivak's point stands: within the discursive economy of the novel, these women cannot speak. Their resistance, such as it is, leaves no legible trace.

This asymmetry between Balram's spectacular defiance and the women's mute endurance is not an accident of plotting; it is the novel's deepest feminist argument, made through structure rather than statement. Adiga shows us that the rooster coop is gendered: the men may, in exceptional circumstances, break free. The women remain.

V. CONTEMPORARY INDIA IN THE NOVEL

Adiga locates his feminist-subaltern drama within a carefully mapped material landscape: the India of the early 2000s, intoxicated by economic growth, haunted by poverty, and fissured by the widening gulf between the globalised urban elite and the immiserated rural mass. This is the India of "India Shining", the advertising slogan adopted by the Bharatiya Janata Party government in 2004 as a celebration of economic liberalisation, which Adiga subjects to savage irony throughout.

For women in this landscape, neo-liberal "development" has been a profoundly ambiguous gift. The macroeconomic literature notes that while India's growth decade produced significant reductions in absolute poverty, its benefits were distributed along existing axes of inequality — including gender. As Mohanty observes, the integration of developing economies into global capitalism tends to intensify the exploitation of women's labour while simultaneously disrupting the traditional community structures that provided them with at least minimal social protection (Mohanty 141).

The world of *The White Tiger* reflects this dynamic precisely. The village of Laxmangarh — Balram's origin — is not a space of a pre-modern community but a space of patriarchal violence exacerbated by economic precarity. Migration to the city does not liberate women; it merely exchanges one form of subordination for another. The novel's urban women — domestic workers, wives of aspiring entrepreneurs, women glimpsed fleetingly in the margins of Balram's account — are subject to the intensified surveillance and vulnerability that accompany the dissolution of community bonds without the replacement of any compensating infrastructure of rights or social support.

The figure of the unnamed child killed in the hit-and-run is particularly charged in this context. That the victim of elite irresponsibility should be ungendered in the novel — neither clearly identified as male or female — while the perpetrator's wife bears the psychological burden of the event is a pointed commentary on the gendered distribution of guilt and consequence in contemporary Indian society. Women bear the emotional costs of male violence while men — Ashok, his brother Mukesh, and ultimately Balram navigate the event through bribery, silence, and strategic disappearance.

VI. DISCUSSION

The foregoing analysis reveals *The White Tiger* as a novel whose feminist significance is inscribed not in its explicit thematic statements but in its structural and narratological choices. The decision to narrate the novel through Balram's first-person voice is not merely a formal device: it is a political act that replicates, at the level of form, the very silencing it depicts at the level of content. By granting Balram a male, upwardly mobile subject — sole access to narrative voice, Adiga enacts the erasure of female subjectivity that his novel documents.

This is a productive rather than a merely cynical irony. The conspicuous absence of female voices in the novel functions as a formal challenge to the reader: the gaps, ellipses, and silences that surround the women characters are readable as the traces of a subjectivity that the dominant narrative cannot accommodate. This reading strategy is consistent with Spivak's methodology of "reading against the grain" — attending to the text's exclusions and contradictions as sites of suppressed meaning (Spivak 294).

The paper's findings also have implications for the broader field of postcolonial literary study. They suggest that analyses of class and caste resistance in South Asian fiction are incomplete without a parallel feminist analysis: that the figure of the male subaltern who escapes his condition does so within and through a gendered economy that must be named as such. Balram's freedom is not universal emancipation — it is the particular freedom of a man willing to deploy violence within a system that affords violence to men. The women of *The White Tiger* remind us of the costs of this particular liberation.

VII. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This paper has argued that *The White Tiger* is most productively read through the combined lens of feminist theory and subaltern studies. The novel's female characters — unnamed, narratively marginalised, denied agency and exit — embody the condition of the doubly subaltern subject described by Spivak: oppressed by the intersecting structures of gender, caste, and class in ways that place them beyond the reach of even the novel's most radical gesture of resistance.

The central irony of the novel, from this perspective, is that Balram Halwai — the self-proclaimed White Tiger, the exceptional individual who breaks free — is not, finally, the subaltern. He is the subaltern who becomes audible, visible, legible. The true subalterns of the novel are the women whose silence underwrites his voice, whose immobility enables his mobility, and whose

continued subordination is the structural precondition of his liberation.

Several directions for further scholarship present themselves. First, a comparative study of subaltern female representation across postcolonial South Asian fiction — engaging Rohinton Mistry, Kiran Desai, and Bapsi Sidhwa alongside Adiga — would illuminate the ways in which the gendered dimensions of subalternity are variously configured across different national, religious, and caste contexts. Second, a reception study examining how Indian feminist readers and critics have engaged with *The White Tiger* would add an important dimension of situated reading to the theoretical analysis offered here. Third, an intersectional analysis incorporating disability, religion, and regional identity alongside gender and caste would produce a still more granular account of the matrix of oppressions the novel depicts.

Finally, the paper suggests that the feminist study of postcolonial fiction must resist the temptation to celebrate male resistance narratives as universal emancipation stories. Liberation that is achieved by, and available only to, one gender is not liberation — it is a redistribution of the terms of power within an unchanged structure of domination. *The White Tiger* knows this, even if its narrator does not.

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